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ABSTRACT

This paper reports on a case study of a U.S. high school literature class during an e-mail exchange with a high school literature class in Moscow (Russia). During this project, the students in both classrooms read short stories by Anton Chekhov and O'Henry. By using the stories as a catalyst, the students' goal was to help their distant partner to understand the culture from where the literature came. The effect that writing for an authentic audience, an audience who was learning to speak English, had on the local students was examined, and close attention was paid to how the local students used "real" English. The role that large and small group discussions about the literature played on the final written products was examined. Also examined was the role that peer editing played. When examined holistically, it became evident that no single element could be given credit for improving the writing skills of the local students. (Contains 16 references.) (MES)

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E-Pals:
Examining a Cross-Cultural Writing/Literature Project

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Introduction

As a middle school teacher in rural North Carolina, I was intrigued by how writing to an authentic audience helped to raise both the motivation and skill levels of my students, many of whom were reluctant writers at best. Students in my class had the opportunity to write often, and to share their writing with their classmates and the greater community. From peer-editing to publishing in our monthly newsletter to performing their writing in front of an invited audience every six weeks, my students simply put forth more effort at attaining polished pieces of writing when they knew it would be seen by others. This concept is not new, as researchers for years have been aware of the effect that an authentic audience, or an audience other than the teacher, motivates students to craft their writing more effectively (Cohen & Riel, 1989; Frank, 1992).

In my classroom, I took the concept of audience one step further by connecting my students with pen-pals back in my home state of Ohio. By conducting exchanges with their geographically distant pen pals, my students' conception of audience expanded beyond their community as they discovered the commonalties and differences they shared with peers 600 miles away. However, unless pen-pal projects are focused around a genuine purpose other than socialization, they can begin to fade. Flower and Hayes (1980) suggest that classroom writing assignments "have a realistic purpose and a real audience (not a teacher), who actually needs to know something" (p. 45). This was the component my students were missing. Also, the time it took to complete an exchange of letters with their distant peers could take anywhere from three to six weeks, as the teacher on the other end of the project would sometimes forget the letters in the trunk of her car as they made their slow journey to the post office. This experience left me wondering how else students could be connected over great distances to discuss topics more germane to the curriculum than their CD collections or favorite movies.

Many recent studies have focused on using networked computers (computers that are connected to one another via the Internet) to connect students to one another to discuss topics relevant to the students' academic program (Eldred, 1991; Fey, 1993; Niday & Campbell, 2000). In a study conducted by Niday and Campbell (2000), middle school students were paired with college students preparing to become English teachers. Using the Internet as their meeting space, the students in both classrooms engaged in discussions about young adult literature. Because e-mail is similar in form to dialogue, it has become a useful tool for extending classroom discussions beyond the four walls of the traditional classroom. In another online correspondence (Citrino & Gentry, 1999), students from Kuwait, Alaska and Utah were joined to share family stories as a way to interpret culture. By allowing students to connect in this way, the stories and experiences they brought to the classroom were validated, and their contributions were seen as meaningful and useful to other students who were trying to learn more about the cultures of their peers.

It was after reading about connections like the ones mentioned previously, and my love of students sharing and discovering themselves and one another through writing, that I was drawn to my study. A local high school literature teacher had been involved with e-mail projects with students from Japan, Australia and Russia for nearly ten years. During the second semester of 1999-2000 school year, I conducted a case study of his classroom during an e-mail exchange with a high school literature class in Moscow, Russia. During this project, the students in both classrooms read short stories by Anton Chekhov and O'Henry. These two authors were chosen by the teachers on the basis of the similar themes present in the stories, as well as the similar time periods in which the authors wrote. By using the stories as a catalyst, the students' goal was to help their distant partner to understand the culture from where the literature came. Below (see Figure 1) is the sequence of the e-mail project I studied. Because the students relied on e-mail as opposed to traditional mail, four exchanges were able to occur, as opposed to possibly one or two. The speed of the exchanges was definitely a motivating factor to the students. However, there were other factors at play in this project as well as the technology. In order to view the project holistically, I examined all of the elements that were at play. I examined the effect that writing for an authentic audience had on the local students, an audience who was learning to speak English, and paying close attention to how the local students used "real" English. I examined the role that large and small group discussions about the literature played on the final written products. Finally, I examined the role that peer editing played both during and after writing had been produced. When examined holistically, it became evident that no single element could be given credit for improving the writing skills of the local students.

Figure 1: Sequence of reading and writing activities for the American students during the e-mail project.

Week	Reading and Writing Tasks
1	Students wrote introductory letters to their Russian partners. These letters included autobiographical information plus information about O'Henry. These letters were projected on the wall and peer-edited by the whole class as a group before they were revised and sent to the Russian students.
3	The Russian students' letters arrived. These letters were also introductory in nature and contained information about Chekov. Students began reading the short stories that dealt with the law. These stories included O'Henry's "The Cop and the Anthem" and Chekov's "Chameleon." During the reading process, students asked questions and discussed the text as a class. Students wrote first drafts of their second letters to their Russian partners. These letters were peer-edited in small groups. Revised letters were then sent to their Russian partners.
5	The second set of Russian students' letters arrived. Students began reading O'Henry's "The Gift of the Magi" for the next exchange on Christmas. After reading the story as a class, small groups were formed for brainstorming and writing their responses. After small-group peer editing, the third exchange of letters was sent to their Russian partners.
7	The third set of Russian students' letters arrived. Students began reading O'Henry's "The Last Leaf" and Chekov's "The House With the Mansard" for their final exchange, this time about art. After reading the stories as a class, small groups were formed as before to write and peer-edit their final responses to their Russian partners.
10	The semester came to an end before the Russian students had a chance to complete the fourth exchange of letters.

The E-mail Project

As illustrated in Figure 1, this e-mail project consisted of four exchanges between a local high school literature class and a high school literature class in Moscow, Russia. The American students began the project by writing a letter of introduction to the Russian students. Besides personal introductions, these first letters contained information about the life and work of O'Henry, as the Russian students were involved in a project on American authors. To complete the first exchange,

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the Russian students chose an American partner and wrote back to them, via e-mail, introducing themselves and including biographical information on Anton Chekhov for the American students to use in their author study. After the initial exchange, the literature guided the online dialogue. The first two stories read were O'Henry's "The Cop and the Anthem" and Chekhov's "Chameleon." Both stories dealt with aspects of the law. Students were to compare and contrast the styles of the two authors, and then relate personal experiences they have had with police or the law. The exchanges continued in this fashion throughout the remainder of the project. Unfortunately, time ran out before the Russian students were able to complete the final exchange. However, enough information had been shared in the three complete exchanges to satisfy the students involved.

The Opportunity to Write for a Distant, Authentic Audience

In order to determine what accommodations students would make when writing to non-native English speakers, I had six focus students write additional letters to in-class peers. Each time a letter was due to be sent to their Russian partners, I asked these students to write an additional letter to another focus group student. By comparing these two letters—one written to their in-class peer and one written to their Russian peer—I was able to determine what the students did differently depending upon their audience. Using the system-wide rubric for holistic scoring as a guide, I compared the two sets of letters based upon their rhetoric/stylistic features such as use of slang, explicitness, and assumed shared cultural context. I also compared the two letters based on usage/mechanical features such as observance of grammatical conventions, punctuation, and spelling (See Figure 2).

Figure 2: Descriptive categories for comparative letters.

Descriptive Categories	Letters to Native Speakers	Letters to Non-Native Speakers
I. Rhetorical/Stylistic Features	1. Use of slang 2. Vague (generalizing) 3. Assumed shared context 4. Informality in register	1. Avoidance of slang 2. Explicitness 3. Lack of assumed shared context 4. Formality in register
II. Usage/Mechanical Features		
A. Grammatical Features	1. Indifference to conventions 2. Use of contractions	1. Observance of conventions 2. Avoidance of contractions
B. Punctuation/Spelling	1. Indifference to punctuation 2. Spelling errors	1. Observance of punctuation 2. Lack of spelling errors

The Opportunity for Discussion About the Literature

Each of the short stories was read aloud as a large group. Student volunteers took turns reading from the text as the teacher sat off to the side, ready to answer questions. As each short story was read, students were encouraged to ask questions and take notes, searching for information that they may want to ask their distant partners about. After the stories were read, students were asked to break into smaller groups of three or four to further discuss what they had read. Before the small groups gathered together, the teacher gave them some guiding questions to think about when composing their letters to their partners. For example, for the second exchange that dealt with the law, he asked his students to focus on the following four topics:

1. Give and incident in which you or a friend had an experience with the police.
2. Give an incident in which a national, well-known case of injustice occurred.

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3. Compare and contrast the actions of the police in the two stories.

4. Compare and contrast the writing styles and motivation for writing of Chekhov and O'Henry.

By having his students discuss these guiding questions in small groups, their ideas and experiences could play-off of each other's, resulting in richer letters written to their partner's.

The Opportunity for Peer-Editing

Just as the American students had the opportunity to discuss the literature in groups before they wrote, they had the opportunity to have their writing seen by peers before it was sent to Russia. Recent studies have indicated that allowing students the opportunity to have their work peer-edited before it is seen by a larger audience can be highly motivating, as the students in this project wanted to act as teachers in how to model the correct use of English (Kasper, 2000; Tillyer & Wood, 2000). Peer editing, in combination with the opportunity to discuss the literature in large and small groups, helped the students to take ownership of their writing before it was sent off to their distant peers.

Method

As stated previously, I chose a case study methodology in order to describe this case in its entirety. According to Merriam (1988), "The aim of descriptive research is to examine events or phenomena" (p. 7). For this study, I triangulated my data collection methods. Data collection took the form of pre- and post-project attitudinal surveys, e-mail document analysis, student observation, student and teacher interviews, and a post-project group peer-response session in which I had my six focus students decide how they would take a letter written for one of their in-class peers and change it to make it suitable to send to their Russian partners.

As mentioned above, I used a combination of attitudinal surveys and teacher input to select six focus students with which to work closely during this project. I selected three students who perceived themselves as being strong writers, and three who perceived themselves as being weak writers. This was done to compare what the two groups would do differently when responding to and editing their writing for their distant peers vs. their in-class peers.

Results

Almost every student, both local and Russian, indicated a high level of enjoyment throughout this project. Each of the elements of this project played a key role in the overall improvement of the students' writing skills.

The Opportunity to Write for a Distant, Authentic Audience

After participating in this cross-cultural e-mail project, students indicated that they now paid more attention to their writing based upon their intended audience. The majority of the class (58%) stated in a response to a post-project survey question that writing for an authentic audience (their Russian partners) made them pay closer attention to things like grammar, punctuation, spelling and clarity. Comparing the letters written by the focus students to in-class peers vs. their Russian peers indicates that the usage/mechanical errors and generalizations (mainly due to assuming a shared cultural context) present in the local students' letters to in-class peers were either eliminated or otherwise changed in the letters for their Russian partners. Furthermore, the students indicated an increased sense of confidence and satisfaction with their letters to their Russian partners as the project progressed. In an interview session, one student stated that, "Normally, I don't care how I

write. I mean, I'm just writing for myself or for a teacher and it doesn't matter if I can't spell perfectly. But if I'm writing to [my Russian partner], it *has* to be perfect." Similarly, another student claimed, "Most of the time, when I write to a teacher, I just write down whatever and say, 'Here, fix it.' But when I write to somebody else, if somebody else is gonna look at it, I try to make it sound like I'm intelligent and I know what I'm talking about." Because students in this project were writing for authentic audiences and for authentic purposes, greater care was taken in their writing than if they had been writing solely for the teacher (Cohen & Riel, 1989).

The Opportunity for Discussion about the Literature

By allowing students to respond on a personal level to the literature read, the students felt a greater sense of ownership of what they wrote. Plus, sharing their personal responses with peers in both whole and small group discussions gave students more than one viewpoint to consider when composing their own writing (O'Donnell, 1980). This was true for both the strong and the weak focus students. By reading collaboratively, as opposed to individually, all students learned skills that encouraged them to develop "literate behaviors" (Hynds, 1990). Hynds (1990) explains, "Readers develop the will to read through participation in supportive communities of readers. This motivation to read encourages them to seek out and master the necessary competencies and skills" (p. 255). During this project, students were reading for more than simply a grade on a comprehension test, thus their motivation to read and understand was high. The degree to which students connect on a personal level with the literature has much to do with the likelihood that they will continue to read beyond what is assigned to them in class. For this reason alone, providing a collaborative reading community in which to connect to the literature was a benefit.

Each of the six focus students indicated that they appreciated having the opportunity to talk about the literature before they wrote their letters. In fact, the small group discussions seemed to be the most beneficial for the students. Several times I observed students who were not talking very much in their groups, but who were engaged and jotting down ideas as they heard them. Because of their involvement and listening skills, they were able to consider many more ideas for writing than if they had been assigned to write alone without the benefit of prior discussion. Even though quiet students may have made fewer comments, they were exposed to all comments and could draw upon the experiences of their peers to enhance their own writing. As one student stated, "I like talking about what I'm going to write before I write it. I like to know what other people are going to say. That always gives me better ideas." Her comments offer an excellent illustration of Vygotsky's (1978) zone of proximal development. Working alone, this student may not have been able to generate or articulate ideas as well as she could have when allowed to work collaboratively to talk about her writing with her peers.

The Opportunity for Peer-Editing

The opportunities for peer editing was beneficial to each of the students involved in this project. However, the benefits of peer editing were more pronounced for the weaker writers than the stronger writers. Because they did not want to be perceived as "dumb" or "stupid" by other peers, the students identified as weak writers in this project became even more aware of surface-level grammatical and spelling errors than their in-class peers identified as strong writers. According to Tillyer & Wood (2000) this is not uncommon. Many students with weaker writing skills like the pace of e-mail communication—fast enough to keep interest levels high, but slow enough to allow for careful thought and editing before each correspondence is sent (Tillyer & Wood, 2000). With increased confidence and opportunities for genuine purposive writing comes increased motivation to write. As one student in my study stated, "I wish *all* my classes were like [this one]!"

The strong writers in this study also benefited from the peer-editing process. It allowed these students to demonstrate their talents by helping their peers, which increased everyone's confidence (O'Donnell, 1980). Also, by being looked upon as experts, both by their in-class and distant peers,

these writers were more motivated to be certain that their writing was clear and error-free, as well as the writing of their peers that they were assisting. The strong writers in this project took their role of expert seriously, as they were in the position to answer not only to their peers, but to their Russian partners as well (Tillyer & Wood, 2000). According to Goussera, (1998) "I believe that electronic discussions [within a collaborative atmosphere] help the students to rely on each other more, and not depend solely on the teacher for answers and comments" (p. 7). With their in-class peers (through peer editing) and their distant partners, (through electronic networking) students involved in this project met one another at multiple sites of interaction, and I feel that their writing was better because of that.

The Role of Technology

According to Tornow (1997), "When a stand alone computer becomes networked, it's as if it suddenly shifts from being opaque to being transparent" (p. 15). In this project, the technology did become transparent. It was a tool that enhanced the curriculum without directing it. However, while using e-mail allowed a timely exchange of letters to occur, and that timelines was a great motivating factor, I still can not be certain that the technology was the most important element in this project. According to the students, the use of technology was at least *as* important (as a motivational tool) as both collaborative discussion and peer editing, but not necessarily more. However, I feel that the technology was a benefit. Because of the increased number of exchanges, students were reading and writing more often (Citrino & Gentry, 1999). The frequency of reading and writing, coupled with the fact that students were working collaboratively to make their own meaning of the text—and sharing that meaning with an authentic audience—all combine to create a project that was beneficial to all students involved.

Implications

Information and knowledge are growing at a far more rapid rate than ever before in the history of humankind. "As Nobel laureate Herbert Simon wisely stated, the meaning of 'knowing' has shifted from being able to remember and repeat information to being able to find and use it" (Bransford, Brown & Cocking, 2000). Bransford et al. (2000) continue:

> More than ever, the sheer magnitude of human knowledge renders its coverage by education an impossibility; rather, the goal of education is better conceived as helping students develop the intellectual tools and learning strategies needed to acquire knowledge that allows people to think productively about history, science and technology, social phenomena, mathematics, and the arts.

Learning how to frame and ask meaningful questions in the attempt to construct meaning about various subject areas is the key to developing lifelong learners (Bransford et al., 2000; Christian, 1997). It is my contention that using networked computers to connect students near and far in collaborative relationships will help to facilitate the development of lifelong learners.

Bransford et al. (2000) suggest that learning for understanding is rare in many school curricula today, as such curricula emphasize memory instead. While facts are indeed important for thinking and problem solving, facts alone, disjointed from their larger contexts, serve as a shaky foundation upon which to build an education. According to researchers (Bransford et al., 2000; Rogoff, 1998), schools and classrooms should be learner-centered, places where the knowledge, skills and attitudes that students bring with them are acknowledged. In my study, students were allowed to display and construct their knowledge collaboratively. The teachers did not have all of the answers, and students were allowed to bring their own knowledge and experiences to light during the process of communicating with their distant partners.

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